

Christ Church, 18.i.15: Epiphany 2

Readings: 1 Sam 3: 1-10 (11-20) Rev 5: 1-10 Jn 1: 43-51

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord our Strength and our Redeemer.

It's a great pleasure to be able to address you again here at Christ Church, and to take a seminar after this service; I do hope that you'll stay for that event if you're able, not least if you want to pick up on anything I say in this sermon – I'd be delighted to discuss anything in it further, if you wish.

It's also a great pleasure to offer a word or two by way of 'taster' about Jonathan Sacks' book 'The Great Partnership', which I understand will be the basis of more sermons and seminars here at Christ Church when we get a bit closer to Easter. It's an excellent read, and I do hope as many of you as possible will get hold of it whether or not you're able to join in the discussions here. It covers a very wide ground, so there's a lot to get your teeth into, and I think it won't leave you short of things to discuss. It is, I think, particularly valuable for us as Christians to hear what this Chief Rabbi has to say about the Hebrew Scriptures, and in particular on the ways in which we have a tendency to read them through a Greek philosophical lens, which is alien to the authors who produced them. This is something of which we've been aware for a while – I think it was Dean Inge, back in the early twentieth century, who commented that Christianity is so wrapped up together with Platonism that it is all but impossible to disentangle them. To give you an example of this, Sacks points out that the Hebrew Bible says very little about life after death, and there's not a great deal on this topic in the New Testament, either. (There's a little, of course: our reading this morning from the book of Revelation is set in heaven.) Here's what I dare say many of us would think of as a classic Christian understanding of such matters:

We believe, do we not, that death is the separation of the soul from the body, and that the state of being dead is the state in which the body is separated from the soul and exists alone by itself and the soul is separated from the body and exists alone by itself? ... When death comes to a man his mortal part, it seems, dies, but the immortal part goes away unharmed and undestroyed ... It is perfectly certain that the soul is immortal and imperishable, and our souls will exist somewhere in another world (Phaedo 64C, 106E-107A).

It's beautiful stuff, to be sure; but it isn't from the Bible – it's from Plato's 'Phaedo'. (Do have a read of this if you've time: it's a lovely book.) I'm sure we can begin to see something of the force of Sacks' critique, about our reading Scriptures through a Greek philosophical lens.

Anyway, this is taking us away from our main theme this morning, which is the relationship between science and religion. Sacks offers us a handy epigram here. He writes: 'science takes things apart to see how they work. Religion puts things together to see what they mean.' This sounds rather like an example of what is known as the 'Independence thesis' regarding the relationship between science and religion, which says that both are important, but they fundamentally do different things, addressing different aspects of human experience, and we shouldn't confuse their areas of competence as this is the way in which tensions can arise. (There are other ways of thinking about how they can relate, which I'll come back to in the seminar later.)

Sacks actually goes rather further than this, urging that science and religion have plenty to offer one another, and shouldn't be kept in watertight compartments. But this understanding of their separate tasks – 'Science takes things apart to see how they work, religion puts things together to see what they mean' – is a really helpful one, I think, not least

in the way it introduces the idea of *meaning*. How do we find, or construct, meaning in the world around us?

The main tool we have for this, I think, is *narrative*. It's the stories which we tell that form the background to the understandings by which we live our lives. As Christians we inhabit a particular narrative about the relationship of God to God's creation, and the particular key role in that relationship played by the person of Jesus Christ. The details of how we tell and understand that narrative have changed and evolved over time, of course, as theological ideas develop. And there are other narratives that people today tell, too.

A sociologist called Christian Smith has written perceptively about this. I was particularly struck by what he calls a 'scientific enlightenment narrative', which goes like this.

For most of human history, people have lived in the darkness of ignorance and tradition, driven by fear, believing in superstitions. Priests and lords preyed on such ignorance, and life was wearisome and short. Ever so gradually, however, and often at great cost, inventive men have endeavoured better to understand the natural world around them. Centuries of such inquiry eventually led to a marvellous Scientific Revolution that radically transformed our methods of understanding nature. What we know now as a result is based on objective observation, empirical fact, and rational analysis. With each passing decade, science reveals increasingly more about the earth, our bodies, our minds. We have come to possess the power to transform nature and ourselves. We can fortify health, relieve suffering, and prolong life. Science is close to understanding the secret of life and maybe eternal life itself. Of course, forces of ignorance, fear, irrationality and blind faith still threaten the progress of science. But they must be resisted at all costs. For unfettered science is our only hope for true enlightenment and happiness. (MBA p. 71)

I don't know about you, but this seems to me to be a strikingly familiar story. It underpins a great deal of what is presented in our media, and it is more or less the expected intellectual background of educated Westerners today – indeed, if I wished to be provocative, I would say that to be a 'freethinker' today means to set oneself against this narrative. It is also a scheme which is all about understanding how things work, which sets itself against the idea that they *mean* anything much at all. Since there are some who do address the idea of meaning within this narrative – even if it is to deny that there *is* any meaning to the universe, or to life – I think it would be fair to say that for such people this scientific enlightenment narrative is the basis of a modern, secular religion.

From an historical point of view, however, this narrative is of course demonstrably false. One of my favourite stories illustrating this is that of Christopher Columbus. As we all know, when Columbus sailed West to search for a new route to the Indies he was warned by the learned people of the day – i.e. those Church folk who were steeped in tradition and superstition, as the Scientific Enlightenment narrative would have it – that the earth was flat, and that if he sailed West he'd come to the edge, and fall off. Defying the wisdom of his day, Columbus sailed West anyway, thereby discovering America and proving that the earth wasn't flat after all. A triumph of bold exploration over hidebound, moribund ideas.

There's just one thing wrong with this story: it is completely untrue. No-one in Columbus's day thought that the earth was flat – at least, no-one whose view carried any weight did so. They all thought it was round, as we do. What's interesting about this story, therefore, is where it comes from, and why it has been so widely circulated. It turns out that this story was invented by an American writer named Washington Irving (famous also for the story of Rip van Winkle) in the 1830s. He wrote a biography of Columbus in which he referred to a Church Council in Salamanca which warned Columbus that the earth was flat. Dramatic as such an event would doubtless have been, no such council ever took place:

Irving simply made it up. Later in the nineteenth century, polemical writers with their own anti-religious agendas picked up the story as a shocking indictment of the Church: it was broadcast widely, to the extent that it was reproduced in school history textbooks, but it is in fact a complete fabrication.

History, on investigation, often turns out to have been rather more complex than simple, straightforward narratives like the Scientific Enlightenment narrative will allow. A master of analysing history as a complex phenomenon is Oxford Professor John Hedley Brooke, who has written widely on science and religion, and I have no shame whatsoever in plugging the fact that he's giving three lectures at New College later this month (26, 27 and 29 January), on Galileo, Darwin and Einstein – do come and hear him if you can.

Narrative is important for generating meaning. But it does more than that: it insulates itself against other narratives. And one way the Scientific Enlightenment narrative does that is through its emphasis on evidence. Next time you're listening to news programmes, look out for the number of times that people who want to emphasise the seriousness of what they are saying use the expression 'evidence-based'. This use of 'evidence' has been used to stir up conflict between religion and science: it's even been said that 'faith' is 'belief in something in the absence of evidence'. But this is patently absurd: no-one believes anything in the absence of evidence. It's just that the kind of evidence they might cite doesn't count within the scientific enlightenment narrative, which only allows publically-accessible, repeatable, objective evidence to count – not things like personal feelings, or intuitions, or ambiguous correlations. Within the scientific enlightenment narrative, the only evidence that could count for God is the kind one could never reasonably expect to observe.

On the face of it, the little story presented to us in our Gospel reading this morning reads like an account of someone believing in the absence of evidence. Nathanael acclaims Jesus as 'the Son of God! The King of Israel!' having only just met him, and barely

exchanged a few words with him. What evidence did he have for hailing Jesus in these terms? Absolutely none, of the kind that the scientific enlightenment narrative will admit. But that intensely personal encounter – lasting just a few seconds, as it is reported to us – gave Nathanael all the evidence he needed. And that is shown, I think, in the telling question he asks Jesus: ‘Where did you get to know me?’

Nathanael wasn’t dealing with some inanimate object, an ‘it’, about which he could glean objective evidence for its properties and its behaviours. He was dealing with a person, a ‘you’. And what he immediately perceived was that Jesus knew him. His existence wasn’t an irrelevance, a chance phenomenon in an indifferent world. He was known – known, moreover, by the Son of God. This, for him, was evidence: this formed the basis of his belief: this led him to be able to exclaim, ‘You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!’ I guess that for many of us today, that sense of being known by God will be one of those things that count far more persuasively as evidence for our faith than any number of ontological or teleological or design arguments, seeking to prove God’s existence in more objective terms.

‘Science takes things apart to see how they work. Religion puts things together to see what they mean.’ Meaning is conveyed in narratives: in the narratives of our Scriptures, as we examine and re-examine them for the wisdom they contain; and in the stories we tell about our culture, about our society, about our history. Most importantly, perhaps, meaning for each one of us comes from the unfolding narrative that is our lives, as we engage with God, engage with people, and engage with the world around us, in all their richness and all their complexity – and as we are ourselves shaped by that engagement. May we see God more and more alongside us in those narratives; and may we look forward, with St Paul, to that time when we will know fully, even as we – like Nathanael – have been fully known. Amen.